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World Chronicle

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Mohamed OUMMIH, President of the United Nations Staff Committee, discusses the staff-management relationship in view of the financial and budgetary crises of the world organization. He points out that, contrary to widespread belief, United Nations staff are underpaid compared to the staff of other international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as well as the United States civil service. United Nations staff understand the seriousness of the current financial difficulties and are willing to cooperate. They ask that reductions in staff be realized as much as possible through attrition and voluntary separation, and that any additional elimination of posts should be accomplished in a fair way, taking into consideration seniority and contractual status as well as performance.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The United Nations has faced more than one financial crisis in the past, but never has it found itself on the brink of insolvency, as it is today. To avoid a financial collapse, the world Organization has initiated a number of money-saving measures which will undoubtedly include reductions in both staff and programmes. How can these measures be implemented without undermining the international civil service? And how can the staff and management work together to help the Organization overcome its difficulties?

With us today to discuss the current situation and to present the staff position is Mohamed Oummih, President of the United Nations Staff Committee. Joining me to talk with Mr. Oummih are Ian Williams of the *Tribune* of London and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*.

Mr. Oummih, welcome to World Chronicle.

OUMMIH: My pleasure.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Chairman, President, is it?

OUMMIH: President.

LITTLEJOHNS: We have the United Nations Staff Union and we have the Staff Committee. What is the difference between the two?

OUMMIH: Well, the Staff Union is the change of the name of the Staff Association that had existed over the years. This change was introduced about 10 years ago to emphasize the changing nature of the relationship between the staff and the administration. And we are a Staff Union as per statutes that have been approved by the Secretary-General. The Staff Committee is the executive branch of the Staff Union, and the legislative body is the Staff Council. So you have the Staff Union, which comprises all the staff, and that are part of this Union, which includes the staff in Europe and also about 5,000 to 6,000 other staff in the field; the Council is the legislative branch; and the Staff Committee is the executive branch.

LITTLEJOHNS: And are you the President of the Staff Union in New York?

OUMMIH: Right.

LITTLEJOHNS: As well as the Committee?

OUMMIH: Right.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tell me, Mr. Oummih, how many people are involved? Is it mandatory for members of the Secretariat to be members of the Union? And how militant

are your people, and what are the weapons that you have to meet some of the proposals from the management side which may not be very palatable?

OUMMIH: Well, I think there are three questions here. The first question, how many people: We are here about 5000 something, almost 6000, in New York.

LITTLEJOHNS: And they're all members of the Union?

OUMMIH: And they're all members of the Union, but not by obligation. Every staff member, when hired by the Organization, becomes automatically a member of the Staff Union, and that doesn't mean necessarily that that person is contributing financially to the Staff Union, contrary to what we have outside. So that's the first difference. We have also, as I mentioned before, about 6,000 staff in the field around the world which are part of the Union in New York. We also represent – and this is something that is not known, unfortunately – UNICEF. UNICEF staff, through a referendum about three or four years ago, voted to stay part of the Staff Council, the Staff Union of New York. So we are very big in terms of numbers, as to the number of staff that we represent here.

LITTLEJOHNS: And what about militancy and what weapons you have?

OUMMIH: Okay. Well, the militancy – my own programme has not been on militant values; it has been rather on the conviction I have that management and staff are all in the same boat. We are part of this Organization, as we have always said, because of conviction, because we believe in the Organization's ideals, and we feel that negotiation and consultation are the best means of achieving what the Organization needs, and that is an efficient Organization. We have been calling for efficiency for years. We have been calling for the abolition of the performance – the way of doing performance reports before. We are in favour of that; we have been in favour of it; for many years we have been calling for those reforms. The problem is that we – those appeals have never been acknowledged, even by Member States. And we feel that it's unjust, and we feel that what has happened, what is happening now is basically putting the brunt of the crisis on the staff, while we do not deserve it and we didn't do anything for that reason. So I think the problem is double. On one hand we are victims, but on the other hand we are ready, and we have been ready all the way to make sure that this Organization functions the best it can.

WILLIAMS: I noticed that one of your proposals to the Secretary-General was to end the performance appraisals. And I note everything that you say as a sort of theoretical conviction, but it's true in most bureaucracies across the world that there's a feeling grows amongst the staff that the Organization exists to give them a salary, not for them to perform functions, sometimes. And whereas I agree that most of your members in the staff are zealous and supportive of the ideals of the United Nations, let's say that there's a significant amount of dead-wood that I've come across that would be better out of the Organization for

everyone concerned. If you're going to have cutbacks, and you want to end performance appraisals, how do you make sure that it's not the dead-wood that remains and it's the green shoots that are cut back, which is what usually happens in these exercises?

OUMMIH: Well, first of all, let me take up the word "dead-wood". In the general meeting, the extraordinary general meeting of the staff which was attended by more than 1500 people two weeks ago, one of the staff from the floor – and we invited the Assistant Secretary-General of OHRM and the Controller to the meeting – said –

LITTLEJOHNS: Human Resources.

OUMMIH: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: HRM, the Human Resources Management.

OUMMIH: Right, Human Resources Management. – Said, from the floor, that if there is dead-wood, then that is the fault of the adminstration, that there are dead-wood managers, dead-wood, that the managers are the real dead-wood. Because if the managers do their job, there shouldn't be any dead-wood. Who assigned the functions? Who gives those appreciation? It's not the staff to themselves, it's the managers. So I think there is some.... Now, you mentioned the proposals. The context in which that is proposed is to save money, because we don't feel that training managers after so many years is going to make such a difference, and, we feel, because we have opposed the introduction of this management appraisal system in the way it is conceived today. We agreed in Amman – and I think we have gone through a very big crisis with management on this – we agreed on a system in which there are checks and balances, where if there is a performance rating that is given by a supervisor there is a rebuttal, and that the rebuttal is conducted by a panel composed of both sides, and then the outcome of that panel's report is binding on both sides. We agreed on that. Unfortunately, after the fact, Mr. Connor, who is the Under-Secretary-General, changed the proposal to the Secretary-General to say that it would be only binding on the staff. That is not acceptable. And that is why we are not in favour of that appraisal system. But we are in favour of an appraisal system that can function. So the training problem –

WILLIAMS: This is the new appraisal system.

OUMMIH: The new appraisal system.

WILLIAMS: Because the old appraisal system returned 99.9 per cent excellent, superhuman performance.

OUMMIH: Right. And we – that's what I meant when I said we are, we were, we have been always in favour of a performance evaluation reorganization. We had been calling for the dismantling of that way of rating because it didn't work either way. It didn't work for us, because how can I compete if everybody is having the same rating, an excellent rating?

And at the same time it didn't work for the Organization. So I think what we are saying here is that the staff – and this is in answer to your first part – are ready to do whatever is needed to be done on their part. We need to be recognized, we need to be given the value of our work. We are not, as some have said before, overpaid. We are not. We are underpaid, compared to the – even to the civil service, American civil service. Underpaid.

LITTLEJOHNS: But the Americans say that's not true. They say you're overpaid.

OUMMIH: Okay. That's not true. There is a Commission, the International Civil Service Commission, where America is the big gun, I should say, and that Commission has come up to say that the United Nations salaries are 30 to 50 per cent, 30 to 50 per cent less than OECD, than the World Bank, than the IMF.

BASSIR POUR: Well, that's why good people don't want to come here. It's true.

OUMMIH: Right. And then 15 to 20 per cent less than the American civil service. This is the truth, this is a report. Anybody can consult the report.

LITTLEJOHNS: But the Secretary-General is paid more than the President of the United States.

OUMMIH: The Secretary-General's salary is not part of my mandate.

WILLIAMS: You don't negotiate for him?

OUMMIH: No.

[LAUGHTER]

BASSIR POUR: Mr. Oummih, you spoke about – what's at stake, exactly? We're speaking about cutbacks and everything. Explain to us what's at stake as far as the staff is concerned? What are we talking about, about the lay-offs?

OUMMIH: Well, first of all, I think the crisis for the public needs to be clarified. There are two kinds of crises that we are facing. There is the financial crisis, which is due to the nonpaying contribution – nonpaying Member States contributions. That's one. And there is the budgetary crisis, which has been created by the last General Assembly resolution, which mandated the increase of the vacancy rate in the General Service category from basically 0 or 0.5 to 6.4 per cent. Now, let's pause for a moment. Why 6.4 per cent? Why not 10? Why not 2? It's like – it reminds us of the balanced budget in the United States. Why 10? Why not 8? Why not 6? The 6.4 per cent has been used as the vacancy rate for the Professional Category, because when you want to recruit a professional you have to go through a long process in terms of announcements in the paper, in terms of organization of the examinations, in terms of bringing the person from his or her home country. But that's not valid for General Service, because they are local, they're here, they're ready. So you don't need that time frame that was used. And yet the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly decided that the vacancy rate had to go –

LITTLEJOHNS: The budgetary committee of the Assembly.

OUMMIH: Right. – to 6.4 per cent. Now, that is a problem. Now, the administration, we have been telling the administration that we want to be part of the – we want to participate, according to the Staff Rules and Regulations, in determining the way this can be done. We are not against – we are willing to work as much, as hard as we can in this. Now, what we are talking about, to your question. The figures are not final. There is no one yet who can give you the figures, because it depends on the reports that are coming from every department to the Secretary-General, who will be presenting his report by 31 March this year to the General Assembly. Now, once that report is out, then we will have the figures. We are hopeful that most of it can be done through attrition, can be done through voluntary departure, agreed termination, buy-out programmes, bridging of staff who are close to retirement, et cetera. We feel bad that some staff will have to go – because they are on fixed-term, because of other reasons, post abolition, things like that. Our main complaint, or our main goal is to make sure that equity is there, that justice is there, that you don't have staff going, leaving the Organization just because they don't "please", quote unquote – has nothing to do with performance here, because, as you just said, the system is not in place yet, so you cannot use it – at certain managers, the whim of certain managers. I think we are more talking about the way to do that and to make sure that it is done in all fairness to everybody. As far as the figures, we don't know yet.

WILLIAMS: You mentioned about the fixed-term contracts. Isn't it true that it's been a long time since – most of the staff here have been recruited on short-term contracts over the last few years because of the budget cutbacks. So what this type of programme means is that the younger staff, and presumably the more sort of – with more value to the Organization, will be the first to go, whereas the staff on fixed – the staff who do have permanent contracts, who've been here some considerable time, will be more guaranteed of a job. And so in fact the Organization is guaranteeing itself an ageing work force and getting rid of the younger ones.

OUMMIH: I wish you were right. Because I am – I believe that the Staff Rules are there to make sure that this should happen, at least – unless in certain exceptions where someone is not performing or had problems. Because – that's staff – that's what the Staff Rules calls for, the Staff Rules say that in case of abolition of posts you have to consider the contractual status, you have to consider the length of service, the seniority, et cetera. That's what the Staff Rules say. But the facts are different. I'll give you an example. In the last few months, since November, we have had 38 posts abolished in one department – I don't need to mention the name. The 38 staff members who were slated for departure were holding permanent contracts. The 38, 100 per cent. Not one of them was on fixed-term. So

I think there is a – something is wrong in either of the assessments: To say that the last ones should go – I don't think so, I don't believe so; but to say also that everyone who has to go should be on permanent contract, I don't think so. I think this is the core of the problem. We have to make sure, I think we are human, there are good ones among the fixed-term, there are good ones among the permanent. And you mentioned it yourself. So I think we have to find a way of doing that. And we have the means, in the Staff Rules and Regulations, in the ST/AI/353*, which has been issued in '88, '89, when we went through the retrenchment exercise when we lost 12 per cent of the posts, and we did that, and it worked. So we can do that again.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Mohamed Oummih, President of the United Nations Staff Committee.

BASSIR POUR: Mr. Oummih, you mentioned, of course, the budget crisis – I mean the financial crisis, rather. Is there any resentment amongst the staff towards the main culprits, which are the Member States, in fact, who are not paying – the United States? Is there any resentment?

LITTLEJOHNS: It's not only the United States.

BASSIR POUR: Well, I mean, the biggest debtor is the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: Thirty-nine Member States are in danger of losing their vote because they haven't paid up to two years of dues.

WILLIAMS: But only one State makes a principle out of not paying. The others don't pay because they haven't got the money.

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, I'm not sure that's entirely true either.

BASSIR POUR: And since they pay 25 per cent.... Anyway, towards the people who don't pay.

OUMMIH: Well, I think – again, I would go back to this very important extraordinary general meeting that we had two weeks ago. A staff member, who happened to work in DPI, in Radio, asked Mr. Takasu, who is the Controller of the Organization, Mr. Takasu, there is a rule in the Charter that says that a Member State who does not pay dues should lose the right to vote after two years, two years of arrears. And the answer was, and we knew the answer, and the answer – I'm going to give it to you. But – and all this crisis basically stems from or started since then. The financial questions used to be dealt with through a vote. And, fine, the US or any other country has one vote. Now, what happened four or five years ago, that was replaced by consensus. Which means that this

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* ST/AI/353: Internal Reassignment of Staff: Guidelines for Ad Hoc Joint Departmental Advisory Panels.

country has this guise of veto power. If they don't want something, it doesn't go. And if they want something, they insist on it until it goes.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that applies to all the Member States.

OUMMIH: It applies to all the Member States, except that when the other Member States want to do that, there is a lot of pressure that can be brought on them, and there is no pressure that can be brought on this one. So, here we go. Now, it's very important to recall also that at the general meeting the staff were very angry – and I'm going back to Mr. Williams' question – when the Assistant Secretary-General said that seniority and contractual status are not in the Charter. That is, that was an insult. Because the Charter was – is the base for everything else. But the Staff Rules and Regulations are the ones that implement whatever comes in the Charter. And in the Staff Rules and Regulations, those elements are there. It says that in the case of abolition of posts you have to consider the seniority, you have to consider the contractual status of the staff member. And, at the same time, you have to consider performance. Which, again, I'm reiterating this, that we are in favour of performance evaluation reorganization. So, resentment? I would lie to you if I said there is no resentment. I think the staff of this Organization, because of the level of their education, because of their knowledge, because of their commitment to UN ideals, understand the politics and are not ready to single out any Member States for any reason. We are at the service of the Organization as a whole, we are at the service of 185 Member States, and we will continue to be so.

BASSIR POUR: We were – I was in Europe recently and there was a lot of – in Geneva especially, there was talk of more radical measures. They were talking about a shutdown. Is that just a scare method, or are we actually thinking of a shutdown?

OUMMIH: Well, we staff feel and hope that it won't happen. I think the Secretary-General has made the statement about a week ago or so saying that he will have to close some programmes. I don't know what he means, but I think the situation is very difficult, the situation is very serious. And I must say that there is a very high level of anxiety among staff. We have – we are trying to convey as much information as we can, but if we don't get the information, then it becomes very difficult for us to convey that. Now, in terms of militancy, which my friend here mentioned before, we believe, very sincerely, we believe that the Secretary-General, who is our chief administrative officer, we believe that our relation as a whole, administration-management, will help us avoid any conflict. We really believe so, and we hope that would be the case.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Oummih, you said at the start that management and staff are in the same boat, but at the same time you don't seem to have a very high opinion of the managers; you were quite critical of the managers in some of the remarks you've made.

What's the problem with the managers? How did they get to become managers if they're such a lousy group?

OUMMIH: Well, I never said that they were a lousy group. I said –

LITTLEJOHNS: Those were my words, but – [LAUGHTER]

WILLIAMS: You didn't say they were brilliant. [LAUGHTER]

OUMMIH: No, I said that if you – if – well, in answer to dead-wood, any manager or anybody who said that he has dead-wood, that dead-wood exists because of his lack of managerial skills or lack of managerial insight. If I have three people working for me and one of them is dead and I don't do anything about it, that is my fault. And you go up in the scale, it's the same thing. What I'm saying, we – there is a problem, a fundamental problem: the approach. And unfortunately up to now we have – the system, the appraisal system is not in place yet, there is a problem with the justice system that has not been approved, is not in place yet, and at the same time this financial crisis. Now, the dilemma is that we are asked to do more with less, but then there is a limit on what you can do, more with less. What happens is you get to that limit and you can't function any more. So we have a lot of problems of adaptation of the needs to the means.

WILLIAMS: The Organization for African Unity, faced with a similar crisis, adopted some Draconian measures last year. One of them was that no staff should be recruited from any country that was in default. And I understand, I think one of the Italians actually mentioned this proposal somewhere in the General Assembly last year. How do you think this would be received by the Staff Union – or the host State, since it's the major defaulter – if it were implemented?

OUMMIH: I think it was also mentioned in the context of UNIDO, after the withdrawal of the United States.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Industrial Development Organization.

OUMMIH: Right. For us, believe me, we want to preserve the international character of the Organization, and I think the Secretary-General made a very valid and very important commitment to that effect about two weeks ago when he addressed the High Level Panel about maintaining a core, maintaining the international civil service. And you cannot forecast or foresee an international civil service without the inclusion of any country, and certainly not the United States. So I'm not in favour of that kind of thing, because I think the staff are staff. They do not dictate the policy of their Government. It's like if tomorrow, or it's like if 20 years ago we would say we should not hire Russians because they were Communists. It's – I think –

WILLIAMS: Senator McCarthy did say that in fact in 1950! [LAUGHTER]

OUMMIH: Yes, I know, but we wouldn't, we wouldn't. As a staff, we wouldn't do that.

BASSIR POUR: Mr. Oummih, I have an unrelated question to the crisis. What is the staff policy on the hiring of HIV-infected people?

OUMMIH: I think the – this management, if anything, to their credit, they have been very – and I'm talking about the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management – very active on that field. They have introduced a very good booklet in that regard. And we have tried to be quite advanced in the way to deal with the issue. I think there are indications – everybody is protected. The discretion, the medical file –

BASSIR POUR: So you do hire HIV-infected people?

OUMMIH: We do not ask questions about that. I mean, that is –

LITTLEJOHNS: But every member, every candidate for position in the staff has to go through a medical examination.

OUMMIH: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: So wouldn't that automatically –

OUMMIH: No, no. I think that is something that has not been used at all to fire anybody from the staff.

LITTLEJOHNS: But they do, they do check for HIV?

OUMMIH: Well, that I – they do – I'm not sure. I cannot answer that question.

BASSIR POUR: They do, yes.

OUMMIH: They do check, but I am not sure – I think that what is happening is that it's not used as a way of eliminating anyone from being hired.

LITTLEJOHNS: To the best of your knowledge, are there cases within the Secretariat at the present time? I know a few years ago one or two people died of AIDS. Are there cases now that you know of?

OUMMIH: Well, sir, I mean, we're talking about a population of 5,000 or so. It must be. But it doesn't really have any effect on the rest. If there is someone who is sick, that person is being treated and.... We are of course concerned if there is a case, we make sure that the staff are not affected.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Oummih, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Mohamed Oummih, President of the United Nations Staff Committee. He was interviewed by Ian Williams of the *Tribune* of London and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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